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## *On Bullshit* by Harry G. Frankfurt, Princeton University Press, 2005

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## Because Ideas Matter...

The faculty and staff of Butler University's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences presents

### Recommended Readings



#### *On Bullshit*

Harry G. Frankfurt, Princeton University Press, 2005

Reviewed by J. Rocky Colavito

What's about the size of a Gideon Bible, is titled with one of George Carlin's infamous "seven words," and spent over 20 weeks on The New York Times bestseller list?

It's Frankfurt's slim volume *On Bullshit*, and this little book offers some of the most trenchant analysis of everyday phenomenon that we've all experienced, whether through day-to-day contact or varying levels of actual use. Frankfurt, an eminent philosophy professor, approaches the subject with an eye on defining the term and differentiating it from outright lying. The distinction lies in bullshit's interest in "fakery" (i.e., a misrepresentation of the idea, its situation, or its purveyor) as opposed to "falsity" (lies for Frankfurt are characterized by deliberate falseness of the content; the content of bullshit may, in fact, be true).

Frankfurt's little book raises many significant points about why bullshit has become the norm rather than the exception, and culminates with the observation that bullshit flourishes "whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about." His focus on metaphors of artistic production versus mass production illuminate the mind set that produces bullshit by reminding us that true art is just as concerned with the quality of the means of producing the artifact, whereas bullshit seems only concerned with the artifact itself.

Frankfurt gives us pause to consider our interaction with everyday communication most eloquently. These are ideas that truly matter, and that ain't no bull.

- J. Rocky Colavito is professor of English and Director of Writing Programs at Butler University.